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Clinton Let Bin Laden Slip Away and Metastasize

Sudan offered up the terrorist and data on his network. The then-president and his advisors didn't re

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President Clinton and his national security team ignored several opportunities to capture Osama bin Laden and his te last year.

I know because I negotiated more than one of the opportunities.

From 1996 to 1998, I opened unofficial channels between Sudan and the Clinton administration. I met with officials in National Security Advisor Samuel R. "Sandy" Berger and Sudan's president and intelligence chief.

President Omar Hassan Ahmed Bashir, who wanted terrorism sanctions against Sudan lifted, offered the arrest and e intelligence data about the global networks constructed by Egypt's Islamic Jihad, Iran's Hezbollah and the Palestinia

Among those in the networks were the two hijackers who piloted commercial airliners into the World Trade Center.

The silence of the Clinton administration in responding to these offers was deafening.

As an American Muslim and a political supporter of Clinton, I feel now, as I argued with Clinton and Berger then, that the rise of Bin Laden from an ordinary man to a Hydra-like monster.

Realizing the growing problem with Bin Laden, Bashir sent key intelligence officials to the U.S. in February 1996.

The Sudanese offered to arrest Bin Laden and extradite him to Saudi Arabia or, barring that, to "baby-sit" him--moni

But Saudi officials didn't want their home-grown terrorist back where he might plot to overthrow them.

In May 1996, the Sudanese capitulated to U.S. pressure and asked Bin Laden to leave, despite their feeling that he cou elsewhere.

Bin Laden left for Afghanistan, taking with him Ayman Zawahiri, considered by the U.S. to be the chief planner of the Salim, who traveled frequently to Germany to obtain electronic equipment for Al Qaeda; Wadih El-Hage, Bin Laden's now serving a life sentence in the U.S. for his role in the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya; and Fa also accused of carrying out the embassy attacks.

Some of these men are now among the FBI's 22 most-wanted terrorists.

The two men who allegedly piloted the planes into the twin towers, Mohamed Atta and Marwan Al-Shehhi, prayed in t and Mamoun Darkazanli, a Syrian trader who managed Salim's bank accounts and whose assets are frozen.

Important data on each had been compiled by the Sudanese.

But U.S. authorities repeatedly turned the data away, first in February 1996; then again that August, when at my sugg Hassan Turabi, wrote directly to Clinton; then again in April 1997, when I persuaded Bashir to invite the FBI to come

February 1998, when Sudan's intelligence chief, Gutbi al-Mahdi, wrote directly to the FBI.

Gutbi had shown me some of Sudan's data during a three-hour meeting in Khartoum in October 1996. When I returned, I asked a specialist for East Africa, Susan Rice, about the data available. They said they'd get back to me. They never did. Neither offer directly. I believe they never had any intention to engage Muslim countries--ally or not. Radical Islam, for the added security threat.

And that was not the end of it. In July 2000--three months before the deadly attack on the destroyer Cole in Yemen--I made a plausible offer to deal with Bin Laden, by then known to be involved in the embassy bombings. A senior counter-terrorism official from one of our closest Arab allies--an ally whose name I am not free to divulge--approached me with the proposal after telling me he had discussed it with U.S. counter-terrorism officials.

The offer, which would have brought Bin Laden to the Arab country as the first step of an extradition process that would have required only that Clinton make a state visit there to personally request Bin Laden's extradition. But senior Clinton officials got caught up in internal politics within the ruling family--Clintonian diplomacy at its best.

Clinton's failure to grasp the opportunity to unravel increasingly organized extremists, coupled with Berger's assessment of the U.S., represents one of the most serious foreign policy failures in American history.

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